

# McFarlane Nature Park Receives Gifts of Native Azaleas

*By Karin Guzy, The Cobb Land Trust Inc.—Marietta, GA*

On November 14, just as the weather turned, 58 native azaleas moved to their new home at McFarlane Nature Park in East Cobb County, Marietta, GA.

The 12-15-foot tall azaleas were pruned, dug, and wrapped at the home of Jan Spring, where she lived for 42 years. Her garden is less than one mile from the park. When her home was sold, it was clear that most of the azaleas were endangered by the development plans of the new owner.

Spring had a very rural childhood in western Kentucky where she became enamored of nature.

When she moved to her property in the Atlanta Country Club in 1978, it was covered with “scuppernong vines, saw-briar bushes, honeysuckle, Virginia creeper, weeds and snakes,” she recalls. “The first two years I never stepped outside without a rifle or a shovel in my hand. I killed so many big, fat snakes that I skinned them and made belts for Christmas presents.”

But the other thing that came with the property was an experienced gardener for a neighbor. The neighbor, Jack Halliday, loved wild azaleas. He told Spring that the area “had been covered with native azaleas before the development started.” Initially there were six pink azaleas growing along the creek that ran through her property. They are “so pretty and smell so sweet,” she says, “I was smitten and determined to rescue and preserve as many as possible.”

Jan herself tells the tale of her growing relationship with these plants:

“Two nurseries in North Georgia sold wild azaleas and Jack knew the owners so I bought a lot of my orange bushes from them. My good friend Jenny and I moved four very-large pink azaleas from her grandmother’s farm in Gwinnett County (GA). I started following road construction news in Cobb County to stop bulldozers so I could dig up wild azaleas.

“For years I carried a washtub, shovels, gallon

jugs of water and three kids in the back of my station wagon. My kids played in the car and I rescued wild azaleas.”

Spring recalls the locations of her digs, some near expanding expressways, growing shopping areas, and new residential developments. She ended up with over 60, of all colors – pink, white, yellow, orange, gold, flame, and bicolor. “Magnificent glory in springtime,” she recalls.

When her collection became endangered by the sale of her property, she approached her nearby neighbor Karin Guzy, chair of The Cobb Land

Trust, which owns the 11.5-acre McFarlane Nature Park, to ask about donating them. The park already held a collection of 42 native azaleas planted in the display gardens and woodland. Master Gardeners of Cobb County have worked at the park weekly since 1993 developing display gardens of Piedmont Region native plants. Guzy did not hesitate to say yes.

The women began to plan how they could make the move for the very mature plants. Spring called it “girl power.” Jan pur-

sued donations from neighbors to pay the expenses of the move while Karin called azalea experts to gather their best advice.

The first call was to Ernest Koone, owner of Lazy K in Pine Mountain, GA. Guzy took lots of notes as they spoke, absorbing the advice that Koone had to offer. At the end of the phone call, he said he could donate 100 plants to the park to help offset the costs of the move. He was already familiar with the park from having supplied hundreds of azaleas to the Georgia Native Plant Society for their annual spring plant sales, held at McFarlane. Of course, his offer was accepted. Two of his plants moved to the farmhouse yard. The remainder were sold to cover expenses.

Karin then reached out to hybridizer Earl Somerville, who also lives in Marietta, GA. Somerville offered confirmation of much of the







advice she had already received, plus planting tips from his years of experience with the plants. Sommerville suggested that he could donate 20 plants or so to the park. The offer was, of course, accepted. Guzy turned to her husband, saying, “I have to stop talking to people about this or we will have more plants than we can handle!”

The Master Gardener crew at McFarlane was enthusiastic about the additions. They set to work transplanting some already established shrubs to make room to spotlight six of the new azaleas. As the move-in date approached, they dug and prepared the holes to receive them.

Spring spoke with a landscaper who worked in her neighborhood. Jeff Miller, of Blade and Bush, offered his time and crew to dig the plants, wrap the roots, and move them to the park, at no cost. Two of his crew also dug 52 of the holes around the perimeter of the 11.5-acre park. Guzy and her husband distributed a bag of pine bark mini nuggets to each planting hole—marking the hole with a pink-flagged bamboo stake.



Jan and her regular helper, David Zarate, started pruning the plants as they entered dormancy, taking 12 and 15-foot tall plants down to about four feet tall to compensate for the inevitable root loss. “Pruning all those buds and cutting off all that growth,” she said, “was like cutting off my own arms and legs.”

Guzy started recruiting volunteers to help put the plants into their new homes. “My hope,” she said, “is that the azaleas will wake up at the park in spring and wonder how they got there.” She shared digging and planting instructions found in the Summer 2016 issue of *The Azalean*, written by Charles R. Andrews III, of Cumming, GA.

The azaleas, with their burlap-wrapped root balls, arrived at the park on November 13. The morning of the 14th, the volunteers arrived—wearing their masks, gloves, and sturdy shoes, and carrying shovels. About 40 people focused on getting the plants in the ground, which was accomplished in short order. Guzy drove the perimeter with a 25-gallon water tank to water them in. Boy Scouts from Troop 797 followed to mulch the newly planted azaleas with pine straw, having been taught the difference between volcanoes and donuts!

Now the wait. Will they notice the move? With the buds pruned off, there will be no floral display from them until Spring 2022, but a good show of healthy new growth will be satisfying. We will all be watching.

#### About the Author:

Karin Guzy is the Chair of The Cobb Land Trust Inc. She can be reached at [karinguzy@gmail.com](mailto:karinguzy@gmail.com) or 678-860-4445. To follow the project or learn more, visit <https://www.facebook.com/McFarlanePark/> or <https://cobblandtrust.org/index.htm>.

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